

FOR RELEASE: A.M.'s

Sunday, November 3, 1963

IMPRESSIONS
OF A
RECENT AMBASSADORIAL EXPERIENCE

by

The Honorable George F. Kennan

Former United States Ambassador to Yugoslavia
and Permanent Professor, School of Historical Studies,
The Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, New Jersey

Memorandum Submitted to the
SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY STAFFING AND OPERATIONS
Senator Henry M. Jackson, Chairman

Sunday, November 3, 1963

MEMORANDUM SUBMITTED TO THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON
NATIONAL SECURITY STAFFING AND OPERATIONS

by
George F. Kennan

Recently retired Ambassador to Yugoslavia
and permanent professor at the
Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, New Jersey

I am happy to be able to submit my views to this Subcommittee and to contribute in this way to its important work.

Since I appeared before the Subcommittee on National Policy Machinery on May 26, 1960, I have served for nearly two and a half years as Ambassador to Yugoslavia. I shall not attempt, in this statement, to go over the same ground covered in the statement I made at that time, but shall restrict myself, generally, if I may, to the impressions of this recent ambassadorial experience.

1. The position of the Ambassador with relation to the Country Team

I assume that the members of the Subcommittee will be interested, in the first instance, to have my impressions about relations between the Ambassador and other members of the country team, on the basis of this recent experience as Ambassador in Belgrade. I must say at once that I encountered no difficulty whatsoever in exerting what seemed to me to be adequate authority over the entire American establishment in Yugoslavia. It may be that I was favored in being surrounded with a group of exceptionally able and loyal assistants, whose abilities I myself admired, whose judgment I valued, and whose attitude towards myself was at all times eagerly and enthusiastically cooperative. But aside from this fortunate circumstance, I had the impression that the authority of an Ambassador over official American personnel stationed in his country is just about whatever he wants to make it. So long as they are in his territory, they have to respect his authority, if he insists, that is so. This applies even to those

Approved For Release 2004/05/12 : CIA-RDP65B00383R000200010002-9

who represent other agencies. If he requires them to do things they consider contrary to their general instructions from Washington, or intrinsically unwise to an intolerable degree, their recourse is in Washington. They can take appeal, in effect, from the Ambassador's judgment; and if they are upheld, appropriate instructions will eventually be issued from Washington to both him and them, and the matter will be settled. But so long as they are there, in his bailiwick, and so long as Washington has not specifically overruled the Ambassador, they have to respect his authority. Anything else would be insubordination; and in a case of flagrant and persistent insubordination, he could require them to leave the country. We, fortunately, had no such situations in Belgrade, and nothing even resembling one.

2. Relations with the Department of State, and other agencies in Washington

A much more serious limitation on my own effectiveness in shaping policy towards the country in which I was stationed was presented by inability to get recommendations accepted in Washington. I rarely had difficulty in this respect when it was a case of policy matters on which the Department of State had discretion to act, although, of course, there were such cases, too. The trouble usually occurred where the Department of State, or at least its central organs, did not have primary responsibility for the decision. The difficulties were greatest, it seemed to me, when the matters in question were ones considered to lie within the primary competence of A.I.D., of the Pentagon, of the budgetary or fiscal authorities, or of those authorities (I am ashamed to say that I do not know exactly who they are) which backstop the Department of State in, and in some respects control, such matters as the issuance of passports, visas, re-entry permits, etc.

With these latter, in particular, I felt the lack of any effective liaison. They included, I suppose, people in the Immigration Service, and in the F.B.I.

I was never sure that they understood, or shared, or respected policy

determinations of the Department of State with relation to Yugoslavia. I had the impression, perhaps erroneous, that many of these people were going on the assumption that Yugoslavia was a member of the Soviet bloc, a thesis contrary to our own observations and to the established analysis of the Department. This hampered our operations and had, in a number of instances, what I considered to be adverse effects on our operations in the field.

In budgetary and fiscal matters, again, the Ambassador was sadly powerless. In general, he simply took what he got. The Department of State might receive his recommendations sympathetically; but the Department itself was too lacking in flexibility and authority to put them into effect with any firmness or promptness. Such recommendations had a habit of trailing off into the mysteries of the Budget Bureau, or the Treasury, or Congressional appropriations committees, to a point where all track of them was lost, where months and years went by, and the Ambassador eventually either was transferred or forgot he had made them. At an early stage in my ambassadorship, I made recommendations for new fencing around the residence in Belgrade, owned by our Government, also for a swimming pool for staff recreational purposes, and for an extension of the Embassy residence. The changes were obviously desirable. We had literally tens of million dollars piled up in local currency, which might have been drawn on for most of the costs of these improvements, and much of which, if not used in this way, will probably never be used at all by us. Nevertheless, nothing actually occurred during my time there as Ambassador. Things are now about to occur, I understand; but the delays were long and discouraging. I should think that if a man enjoys such confidence on the part of his government that he can be entrusted with the responsibilities of an important diplomatic mission, it ought also to be possible to entrust him with a limited control over funds, not major funds, just governmental pocket money, so that he could at least make minor dispositions affecting government property at his post, without waiting years for approval.

With the respect to matters falling under the competence of A.I.D., I found our governmental procedures slow and inflexible to an alarming degree. In general, I felt that the time for aid to Yugoslavia had passed. The aid programs were in fact generally dismantled during the period of my service there; and this was in accordance with my own recommendations. But there were times when a minor area of discretion on the part of the Ambassador would have yielded dividends from the standpoint of national interest, and when the absence of it was frustrating and embarrassing. This, again, was primarily a matter of Congressional policy -- particularly of the existence of sweeping and rigid restrictions on aid, or anything that smacked of aid, towards Yugoslavia. As an example, we were seriously handicapped by these legislative restrictions when it came to trying to render assistance in the case of the Skoplje earthquake. This was surely unnecessary. If the legislative stipulation had only allowed us a relatively small sum, to be used at the discretion of the Ambassador or the Secretary of State in instances when there appeared to be special need, we would have been spared this sort of embarrassment.

3. Relations with Congress

I mention with some hesitation these instances of the limitations placed by legislative action on the ability of the Ambassador to play his part effectively. I have no choice but to do so; for these were the main impediments I experienced to the full deployment of my usefulness at my post. I do not need to remind you of the restrictions placed last year, not only on the extension of anything under the heading of aid, but even on the extension of normal trading facilities to Yugoslavia. These restrictions were adopted in the face of the most solemn and formal sort of warnings and objections on my part, conveyed to Congressional leaders on many occasions and in many ways. It seems to me that a problem is arising here to which we shall all of us have to give attention sooner or later. If I had known, for example, when I was offered the position of Ambassador in

Yugoslavia, how little value the Congress would assign to my own judgment, in the light of an experience of nearly thirty years in the affairs of the Eastern European area, I would not have accepted the appointment; for without the support of Congress it was impossible to carry out an effective policy there. I do not know how this sort of a situation can be avoided; but I think members of Congress might wish to bear in mind that there is usually a price to be paid, not just in terms of the peace of mind of the person most affected, but in terms of the national interest itself, when an Ambassador's recommendations are wholly disregarded on the legislative side of the Government; for it is not just his usefulness in the given question, but his usefulness as a whole, which is thereby affected.

4. Lack of access to information in files at home

I found myself particularly handicapped, as Ambassador, by lack of information as to what was going on at home in matters affecting our work in Belgrade, or of information about Yugoslavia to which other departments or agencies of the Government were privy. For example, it was important to us, from the standpoint of determining policy towards Yugoslavia, to know definitely whether the Yugoslavs were or were not conducting any sort of activity in this country to which we could object. It was my impression they were not; and if anything they were doing here lent itself to any such interpretation, this is something I think I could have discussed to good effect with the Yugoslav authorities in Belgrade. But in the absence of any sort of liaison with the internal security organs of our own country, we simply had to bat in the dark in all such matters. The same was true with regard to the rather complicated affairs of the Serbian church authorities in North America -- affairs in which the Patriarchate in Belgrade was intimately involved and which it fell to me to discuss officially, on more than one occasion, with the Serbian Patriarch in person. Again, although our naval authorities obviously had good information on the use, or non-use,

of Yugoslav vessels in trade with Cuba, and although this, too, was a matter which I was obliged to discuss officially from time to time with the Yugoslav authorities, I was never adequately informed even of what our Government knew about this subject. On all such matters, and others as well, the Yugoslavs with whom we had to deal were better informed, as a rule, than we were.

I understand the reasons that impel our intelligence-gathering authorities to be cautious about divulging to anyone information they have in their files. But the Department of State and the Foreign Service cannot do their work properly if they are denied information, already in the Government's files, which is pertinent to their determinations of policy. I am reluctant to believe that means could not be found, compatible with Governmental security, to keep the Foreign Service at least as well supplied with such information as the governments with which it has to deal.

5. Overstaffing

Members of this Subcommittee may recall that I was one of those who at one time expressed himself as being of the opinion that Department of State and Foreign Service were both greatly overstaffed. I cannot speak, today, for the Department of State. But I should like to say that so far as the official establishment in Yugoslavia was concerned, I found myself in most respects corrected. It is true that this establishment was a great deal larger than the foreign service establishments in which I had served before the war. It included, for one thing, a large U.S.I.S. component, -- something which we did not know at all in earlier days. The administrative section, too, was larger than anything we knew in earlier days. There were also some minor instances of what seemed to me to be excessive paternalism. But when I looked around and asked myself where I could cut, beyond those major cuts which attended the dismantling of the aid mission, it was not easy to find the places. I could have objected to the size

of the informational establishment, had it not been for the fact that these people were doing an extraordinarily perceptive and effective job, and making, as it seemed to me, the fullest possible use of their time and facilities. Either one wanted these things to be done, or one did not. To me, they seemed obviously constructive and desirable; and they could hardly have been better accomplished than they were. These activities were conducted by talented, devoted people, who gave all they had to the job. Who was I to complain?

It was difficult for me to judge the necessity for the relatively large military staffs. I suspected they were larger than they needed to be; but what was at issue here might have been a matter of two or three people. A cut of this order would not have helped us much.

As for the administrative overhead, I am pleased to report that the centralized administrative section, so unfamiliar to those of us who were brought up in the old Foreign Service, actually proved to be a time-saver to myself. It too, was well-conducted; and it was quite effective, as it was intended to be, in freeing my own time for substantive questions. In all instances, the redeeming feature was excellence of personnel and able executive leadership of the respective sections. Perhaps the answer to quantity is quality; certainly, the former without the latter is fatal.

6. Quality of Staff

I think I may have been particularly fortunate, in Belgrade, in the quality of personnel assigned to work with me. In the case of the regular Foreign Service officers, I cannot say whether this happy result was achieved as a result of the arrangements for selection and promotion with the Service, or in spite of them. I still have misgivings about a Service so large and so impersonal in its administration. I suspect that this feature -- the feeling of being a lost cog in a great machine where no one really knew you and your fate would be decided largely by ~~Approved For Release 2004/05/12 : CIA-RDP65B00383R000200010002-9~~ times, on

the morale of the men themselves. But in general, the Foreign Service work breeds its own morale, outwardly undemonstrative, often not externally visible, but inwardly far tougher and more devoted than is generally realized. I can only say that my officers were, without exception, fine men, only too anxious to give loyalty where loyalty was given in return, anxious to learn, to grow in their work, and to serve effectively. If men of this calibre do not become effective diplomats, the Government had best look to its own procedures for handling, training, developing, and encouraging its personnel. As of today, it seems to me that the country has a Foreign Service second to no other, and better than it has a right to expect, given the lack of appreciation and respect exhibited by the public at large for its tasks and its achievements.

7. Inspection arrangements

Shortly before my departure, the Belgrade Embassy was inspected. I would like to say that I have never seen an inspection better conducted: that is, more thoroughly, more rigorously, yet with greater tact or with greater benefit to the staff and to the functioning of the Mission. The Inspection Service of the Department of State has come a long way from the days of the 1920's and 1930's; and the results are beginning to make themselves visible. All that it needs is what the Department and Foreign Service, in general, most desperately need: namely, a demonstration of Executive and Congressional confidence and above all a reasonable measure of administrative stability -- the privilege of doing one thing long enough to let it work.

8. Career vs. non-career

On the law of averages, professional training in the Foreign Service should constitute the best preparation for service as chief of mission, and the majority of our mission chiefs should normally be drawn from this source. There will always be room, however, for people who have come up other ladders, particularly

when they enjoy a special intimacy with President or Secretary of State and are well qualified in other respects. In the course of a long career, I have seen a number of talented people come into these positions from other walks of life. In Belgrade, one did not have to go far to find such an instance: we had, next door in Bulgaria, Mrs. Eugenie Anderson, for whose performance there many of us felt much admiration. Any system so rigid as to forfeit the services of such people would be self-defeating. On the other hand, I am profoundly convinced that the day has passed when the United States can afford to place in high diplomatic positions people who represent anything other than the best available talent for the work in question, whatever their origin, their professional background, or their services to a political party.

9. Tours of Duty

I feel that, in general, the ambassadorial tour of duty should be three to four years, at a minimum. The same is true of foreign service personnel who have special training in, and knowledge of, a particular area. I felt that our performance in Belgrade was definitely weakened by too rapid a turnover in qualified personnel.

10. General organization of Government from standpoint of foreign affairs

It remains my view, as it has been for many years, that the President requires something in the nature of a prime minister for the conduct, on his behalf, of the external affairs of the nation, political, economic, and military. To my mind, this can only be the Secretary of State; and I would like to see him given the requisite authority. Such a change implies, however, a readiness to establish and to maintain, not just in time of war but in time of peace as well, what the German historian Meinicke described as the "priority of foreign policy" - meaning the principle that the external problems of the country should be given precedence over the internal ones, and that foreign policy should not be permitted

-10-

to become a function of domestic-political convenience. To me, it seems urgently necessary that this change, which is one of the state of mind rather than of administrative reform, come over us all at an early date, for our situation now, in what is nominally a state of peace, is far more parlous than it ever was, prior to 1945, in time of war. But obviously, such an effort to centralize and strengthen the conduct of foreign policy will never be effective unless it has the support of Congress and, to a limited and reasonable extent, of the two great political parties.